

Why Animated Art is Not Treated like Gallery Art

by [Stephen X. Arthur](#), 1999

"Animation still isn't properly appreciated as an art in galleries and museums. If you mention it to curators, they do not seem to be truly interested," says the Curator of Film Exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Adrienne Mancia ([Interview](#)).

One reason is this: Visionary, [surrealist](#), or fine-art animation is a form of cinema. A film is meant to be seen and heard in the dark, on a big screen. A film is not an object, we can't view it at our leisure, it exists in time, not space. And so the more contemplative, meditative, detached attitude required to appreciate esthetic objects can't be maintained with animated artwork. Movement and sound are a living reality that enthrall us in a fundamentally different way than do gallery art objects. Amos Vogel expresses this beautifully:

"The viewer must not be distracted from the bright rectangle from which huge shapes impinge on him. Unlike the low-pressure television [or gallery] experience (during which the viewer remains aware of room environment and other people), the film experience is total, isolating, hallucinatory. The viewer 'forgets' where or who he is and is offended by stray light, street or audience noises which destroy the anticipated, accepted illusion. The cinema is a shrine at which modern rituals rooted in atavistic memories and subconscious desires are acted out in darkness and seclusion from the outer world.

"The huge rectangle of the screen becomes the viewer's total universe. What transpires here in bursts of light and darkness is accepted as life; the images reach out to him; he enters them. This entails a greater openness to suggestion, the semi-hypnotic trance of the viewer, the surfacing of deeper desires and anxieties, and the inhibition of reasoned response in favor of 'gut-level' reaction.

"Removed from the real world, isolated even from fellow-viewers, we fall to dream and reverie in the womb-like darkness of the theatre. Flooded by images, our unconscious is freed from customary constraints and our rational faculties are inhibited. Perhaps the state of the viewer is closer to that between waking and sleeping, in which we abandon the rationality of daily life while not yet completely surrendering to our unconscious." -- abridged from *Film as Subversive Art*, 1974

In contrast, media-art installations in galleries are expected to call attention to cinematic illusion, to deconstruct it, to prevent us from entering such a trance, to distance us, to try to make the film into an object. But animators are, by definition, illusionists in the extreme. Illusion is fundamental to the act of animating. So for animators, it seems, art and illusion must always co-exist.

Perhaps animated art fits better within the performing arts such as dance or music. In fact, since the choreography involved in fine-art animation transcends the limitations of dance choreography, those who are aware of these films might well say that [animated art supersedes dance](#).

Perhaps the true role of animated art is revealed in this statement by art writer Edmund B. Feldman:

"It is possible to think of cinema as the deliberate manufacture of dreams... It would seem that our civilization, which has created the most complex technology in history, is impelled to create dream-generating devices for the users of its technology. In other words, our need for synthetic dreams grows in direct proportion to the growth of complex machinery and technical systems in our work, play, and interpersonal relations. The dreams we create organically have to be supplemented by dream machines so we can maintain some sort of human balance, or sanity, in our culture." -- *Varieties of Visual Experience*, 1981

Finally, an additional factor affecting the perception of animated fine art is pointed out by kinetic sculptor Jonathon Borofsky:

"Humor seems to be associated with moving art because of the whimsical chord it seems to strike in us. And moving works are definitely closer to whimsy than to tragedy. These pieces usually enliven one's imagination in a way that makes you smile rather than frown. I guess it goes back to childhood. We like to see movement. We count on watching movement every night on television. In New York City in the summer, people hang out in the windows to watch the activity in the streets. Possibly because it counteracts the movement in our minds." -- in *Motion-Motion: Kinetic Art*, 1989, Jim Jenkins and Dave Quick.